



April 11, 2023

Montgomery County Council President
100 Maryland Avenue
Rockville, MD 20850

MONTGOMERY COUNTY FOOD COUNCIL TESTIMONY: COUNTY COUNCIL FY₂₄ BUDGET

On behalf of the Montgomery County Food Council, I would like to thank Council President Glass and the County Council Members for considering community perspectives in the County Council annual budgetary approval process.

The Food Council greatly appreciates the renewal of our existing base budget funds, including a cost of living increase. The pandemic laid bare many existing weaknesses in our local food system, and we as a community have made significant strides in building partner networks, including new communities for nutrition benefits enrollment and community gardening, and enhancing the capacity of local organizations through trainings, resource connections, and advocacy education. Our ability to quickly and effectively respond to the food access crisis in March 2020 as a cohesive sector was directly due to the County's investment in both strategy, policy, and coordination, as well as direct services. We enthusiastically support the many food system-specific aspects of this budget and encourage the County Council to continue prioritizing allocations that will help us create a more equitable and resilient food system.

Food Investment Opportunities for Remaining ARPA Funding

As the County considers investments with the over \$6.5M remaining ARPA funds dedicated to food security, the Food Council recommends the following for consideration:

- Begin implementation of the recommendations from the Food Council's recently presented Strategic Plan to End Childhood Hunger, such as Food as Medicine initiatives, expansion of SNAP Enrollment Programs, and expansion of the Child and Adult Care Food Program.
- Invest in our resiliency by adopting recommendations from the Food Council's 2022 Environmental Impact Working Group Symposium, such as support for the development and operation of an aggregation and processing facility for food grown by Montgomery County farmers.

Support for Office of Food Systems Resilience

It has never been more clear that dedicated staffing inside the County government is critical in order to create an equitable and resilient food system by building on recent progress and lessons learned through the pandemic. This is why we urge the County Council to support the funding appropriated for the Office of Food Systems Resilience. This newly-created office will improve the health of residents, the local economy, and the environment. County employees will coordinate the efforts of County agencies internally and work with



community-based nonprofits, such as the Food Council, to establish and implement the County's priorities. This would ensure that food systems issues, such as equity, food security, local food production, sustainability, and economic opportunity, are not addressed in a vacuum and cohesively focus on policy and systems-based solutions. Funding to support County staffing to conduct data collection, analysis, mapping and research will help to identify gaps in service, expand SNAP access points, and inform all food security programs. Additionally, the transition from transactional emergency food distribution to an intentional goal of broader food system resilience and food sovereignty is important for the equitable future of our County. Taking these steps will be crucial in order to maximize participation in benefits programs, and to create alternative pathways towards addressing and ending the hunger crisis in our community.

Important dedicated programs supported through this newly-created office include:

- **Farm to Food Bank Initiative:** Piloted during the pandemic, this program has created strong links between local table crop farmers and food insecure residents. Funding through this initiative has also enabled local farms to begin infrastructure improvements to increase food production for years to come. This is a critical step toward local food resiliency, while also supporting our neighbors who need healthy food the most.
- **Market Money Grants:** These grants enhance an existing state resource that removes economic barriers for residents experiencing food insecurity, providing a dollar-for-dollar match for purchases made using federal nutrition benefits at participating farmers markets. Additional grants allow local residents to leverage these federal and state benefits even further, while supporting local farmers and small businesses.
- **Community Garden Grants:** Increased local food production is needed for a truly resilient local food system. Demand for existing community garden spaces and programs is extremely high, and there is an incredible opportunity to leverage available land to increase local resident food production.

Need for Dedicated SNAP Outreach

According to 2020 data from Maryland Hunger Solutions, Montgomery County has the largest SNAP eligibility-to-participation gap in the state of Maryland: approximately 60% of Montgomery County residents who are likely eligible for SNAP are not enrolled.

In October of 2021, the Food Council became a funded Community Based Organization (CBO) with the Maryland Department of Human Services' SNAP Outreach Program to conduct direct SNAP outreach and assistance to Montgomery County residents. The Food Council is one of five CBOs working in Montgomery County to broaden and increase SNAP outreach and enrollment in under-resourced communities by educating outreach workers, referral partners and anti-hunger organizations; prescreening Montgomery County residents for SNAP eligibility; and assisting eligible residents with SNAP applications. However, CBOs only receive reimbursement for 50% of their costs for doing this work and must look to other sources of funding to support these services.

The services that CBOs provide SNAP recipients became even more important as waivers enacted during the pandemic ended. In February of 2021, 79,562 individuals received SNAP in Montgomery County, including 33,143 children. March 2021 saw the return of recertification and interview requirements and by July of 2022, SNAP enrollment dropped in the County to 59,126 individuals (24,690 children). CBOs played a



critical role in re-enrolling residents, educating them on the new requirements, notifying them of important deadlines, and helping them navigate the customer service process when issues arise.

CBOs again played an important role with the recent end of Emergency Allotments that were enacted during the pandemic. The Food Research and Action Center estimates that the end of COVID-era Emergency Allotments has resulted in an average loss of \$82 in benefits for SNAP recipients. The reality for many Montgomery County residents is much starker. Many SNAP recipients who received up to \$281 a month now receive the minimum benefit of \$23, at a time when inflation continues to impact the cost of food. CBOs have supported SNAP recipients during this transition by helping them maximize the benefits to which they are entitled.

Even in the face of these benefit reductions, it is vital for food security and equity that the County works to ensure residents enroll in, and remain on, SNAP, not only for the nutrition support it provides, but also because SNAP could become an important gateway to obtaining additional benefits. House Bills 323 and III, currently pending before the Maryland General Assembly, would allow SNAP recipients automatic enrollment in energy assistance, Medicaid, and the Maryland Children's Health Program. This, as well as other benefits, such as access to free phones and discounts on communication services, make SNAP more valuable than its face value.

Finally, it is important to support the collaboration between the County's CBOs and the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). Since 2020, the Food Council has convened the SNAP Benefits Enrollment and Outreach Work Group, which gathers together organizations that assist Montgomery County residents with SNAP as well as representatives from the DHHS Office of Eligibility and Support Services. We share resources, receive valuable updates on SNAP policy and processes, and provide front-line feedback to OESS on issues facing SNAP recipients. This monthly convening has been called out by the Maryland DHS Family Investment Administration as a model for other counties in the state to follow. Establishing these relationships has led to better service to Montgomery County residents seeking to enroll in SNAP. Fundamentally, more direct funding to CBOs who conduct SNAP outreach and assist Montgomery County with SNAP enrollment is needed.

Support for the Not-for-Profit Sector

As the County finalizes the budget for FY 24, the essential role of strong nonprofits in the COVID-19 response efforts, and otherwise in our community, cannot be overlooked. Additionally, as a member of Nonprofit Montgomery, we join our voices with other leaders in the not-for-profit sector to urge the County to increase the cost of living adjustment for nonprofit contracts by 3.6% on top of the current 3% due to year over year price increases of 6.6% from last March. Nonprofit organizations are small businesses with overhead and indirect costs that are often underfunded. Our location near the nation's capital also means we are competing with national-level nonprofits for local candidates, further shrinking the available talent pool. This funding is critical to ensure a continuation of efforts within the nonprofit community to work in areas of the County where residents have been most impacted by the pandemic, by poverty, disability, racial inequities and other social determinants of health.

By continuing to invest in the Food Council and in our partner organizations and businesses, the County will invest in a more self-sufficient local food system that ensures greater engagement of community voice



and expertise in policy and programmatic work. Investment will also maximize the capacity of direct service provider programs, address hunger and financial barriers amongst County residents, and connect federal and state resources to local efforts.

Thank you for your consideration of this testimony, and for your leadership and support of a more resilient, sustainable, robust, and equitable food system in Montgomery County. We appreciate the County's investment and partnership, and we look forward to the future.

Sincerely,

Massa Cressall
Interim Executive Director, Montgomery County Food Council

